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U.S. intelligence sees new copters as sign of a Nicaraguan offensive

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WASHINGTON — The Sandinista government appears to be preparing an offensive aimed at crushing the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan insurgency movement before President Reagan can ask Congress to resume CIA covert aid to the contras next year, U.S. intelligence officials said yesterday.

The officials, speaking on condition they not be identified, said their chief evidence was the recent delivery of highly sophisticated Soviet Mi-24 helicopter gunships to the Sandinistas.

Although the United States appeared to be continuing to put pressure on Nicaragua, one key Nicaraguan opposition leader said yesterday that the pressure could be doing more harm than good.

Arturo Cruz, a former member of

the Sandinista leadership, said at a Washington news conference that the Reagan administration should allow Nicaragua's newly elected government "a period of grace" to moderate its policies.

Cruz said rising tensions and the "tremendous" recent growth of Nicaraguan rebel forces could prompt President-elect Daniel Ortega to push aside Sandinista hard-liners and grant political freedoms.

Cruz said Ortega's faction of the Sandinista directorate, although Marxist, was more moderate and "has always shown a great deal of disposition toward pluralism, toward making concessions."

The Reagan administration "should give Ortega a period of grace" to try to push aside Interior Minister Tomas Borge's hard-line faction, Cruz said.

Cruz announced the founding of the Citizens Committee for the Pro-Democratic Forces in Central America, a nonpartisan educational organization sponsoring Cruz on a U.S. lecture tour.

Despite current U.S.-Nicaragua tensions, the opposition leader said he doubted that the United States would invade Nicaragua or that Nicaragua would attack one of its neighbors.

Cruz, who has served as Nicaraguan ambassador to Washington but resigned to protest leftist Sandinista policies, said a halt to U.S. support for rebels was "desirable" but must be part of an overall solution that includes an end to Cuban and Soviet-bloc aid to Central American leftist forces.

One U.S. intelligence official said yesterday that the most recent Soviet aid, the helicopters, "are intended to liquidate the contras before Feb. 28." When Congress suspended assistance to the rebels in October, it passed a law saying that Reagan could not seek a resumption of aid until after Feb. 28.

Separately, administration sources said senior officials were debating how the United States should respond to the helicopters and considering the possibility of an assault to destroy the rebels.

The sources indicated that there could be a recommendation for a U.S. military response if the Sandinistas moved against the contras, although no decision has been made. The sources said it also was possible that the White House simply might try to find ways to resume aid to the rebels without waiting for Congress to reconvene.

One option would be to provide the contras with appropriate equipment to counter the Soviet helicopters, such as surface-to-air missiles or helicopter gunships of their own, one official said.

The current military buildup in Nicaragua should help the administration effort to justify resumption of covert aid to the rebels, the officials said.

Intelligence officials said the recent surge in Soviet arms deliveries to the Sandinistas seemed to be part of a concentrated effort to wipe out the contras.

"All evidence points to a possible offensive by the Sandinistas against contra strongholds and bases in northern Nicaragua," said one intelligence official. The official said, however, that he would not rule out possible future use of the new equipment against neighboring Honduras, El Salvador or Costa Rica.

Officials have indicated that if such an attack occurred, the administration might consider it an aggression against Honduras, a U.S. ally, and respond militarily.

The administration's assertions about the helicopters and the contras again shifted the focus of U.S. alarm over the arms buildup in Nicaragua.

Initially, officials said the United States would not tolerate the delivery of advanced combat aircraft to Nicaragua but did not appear to be overly concerned about the helicopters.

Now, officials indicate that the helicopters may be as much a source of renewed tension between the United States and Nicaragua as the MiG-21 fighters would have been.

A Defense Department official said the Soviet freighter that docked in Nicaragua last week carried at least one Mi-24. The administration initially suspected — erroneously — that the freighter had been carrying MiG-21s.

The Pentagon official estimated 12 to 15 Mi-24 helicopters were in Nicaragua, but an intelligence official put the number at nine.

The Mi-24, the world's fastest military helicopter, can reach speeds of nearly 230 m.p.h., depending on engine configurations and load. It can carry up to eight combat-equipped troops and is armed with machine-guns, missiles, rockets and bombs.

It also can be used for air-to-air combat, according to Pentagon officials. That capability concerns the administration because the Sandinistas could use the helicopters to shoot down the light aircraft the CIA has provided the contras to deliver their supplies from bases in Honduras or to conduct quick aerial attacks on military and economic targets.